

Rubens



**MASTERPIECES
IN COLOUR**

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MASTERPIECES
IN COLOUR
EDITED BY ..
T. LEMAN HARE

RUBENS

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BOUCHER.
WATTEAU.
MURILLO.

PAUL G. KONODY.
C. HALDANE MACFALL.
C. LEWIS HIND.
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AND OTHERS.

**PLATE I.—ELIZABETH OF FRANCE,
DAUGHTER OF HENRY IV. Frontispiece
(In the Louvre)**

The Princess is seen to great advantage in this fine portrait. The fair complexion of the sitter is remarkably preserved, the white ruff, the jewels, and the gold brocade are very cleverly handled. Another portrait of Princess Elizabeth, painted in Madrid, may now be seen in St. Petersburg.



Rubens

**BY S. L. BENSUSAN
ILLUSTRATED WITH EIGHT
REPRODUCTIONS IN COLOUR**



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I

INTRODUCTION

The name of Peter Paul Rubens is written so large in the history of European art, that all the efforts of detractors have failed to stem the tide of appreciation that flows towards it. Rubens was a great master in nearly every pictorial sense of the term; and if at times the coarseness and lack of restraint of his era were reflected upon his canvas, we must blame the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rather than the man who worked through some of their most interesting years, and at worst was no more than a realist. There may have been seasons when he elected to attempt more than any man could hope to achieve. There were times when he set himself to work deliberately to express certain scenes, romantic or mythological, in a fashion that must have startled his contemporaries and gives offence to-day; but to do justice to the painter, we must consider his work as a whole, we must set the best against the worst.

PLATE II.—CHRIST À LA PAILLE (At Antwerp Museum)

Whatever the Biblical story Rubens chose, he handled it not only with skill, but with a certain sense of conviction that is the more remarkable in one who owed no allegiance to the Church. There is fine feeling and deep reverence in the “Christ à la Paille,” in addition to the dramatic feeling that accompanied all his religious pictures. The colouring, though very bold, is most effective; in the hands of a less skilled painter such a display of primary colouring might well have seemed violent or even vulgar.



Consider the vast range of achievements that embraced landscape, portraiture, and decorative work, giving to every subject such quality of workmanship and skill in composition, as none save a very few of the world's great masters have been able to convey to canvas. And let it be remembered, too, that Rubens was not only a painter, he was a statesman and a diplomat; and amid cares and anxieties that might well have filled the life of any smaller man, he found time to paint countless pictures in every style, and to move steadily forward along the road to mastery, so that his second period is better than the first, in which he was, if the expression may be used with propriety, finding himself. The third period, which saw the painting of the great works that hang in Antwerp's Cathedral and Museum to-day, and is represented in our own National Gallery and Wallace Collection, was the best of all. Passing from his labours as he did at a comparatively early age, for Rubens was but sixty-three when he died, he did not suffer the slow decline of powers that has so often accompanied men who reached their greatest achievements in ripe middle age and shrink to mere shadows of a name. He did not reach his supreme mastery of colour until he had lived for half a century or more, and the pictures that have the greatest blots upon them from the point of view of the twentieth century, were painted before he reached the summit of his powers. It is perhaps unfortunate that Rubens painted far too many works to admit of a truly representative collection in any city or gallery. The best are widely scattered; some are in the Prado in Madrid, others are in Belgium, some are in Florence. Holland has a goodly collection, while Antwerp boasts among many masterpieces "The Passing of

Christ," "The Adoration of the Magi," "The Prodigal Son," and "The Christ à la Paille." Munich, Brussels, Dresden, Vienna, and other cities have famous examples of both ripe and early art that must be seen before the master can be judged fairly and without prejudice. It is impossible to find an opinion not likely to be shaken, upon the work to be seen in London or in Paris, where the Louvre holds many of the painter's least attractive works. It may be said that Peter Paul Rubens is represented in every gallery of importance throughout Europe, that the number of his acknowledged works runs into four figures, and that there are very few without some definite and attractive aspect of treatment and composition that goes far to atone for the occasional shortcomings of taste. For his generation Rubens sufficed amply. He was a man of so many gifts that he would have made his mark had he never set brush to a canvas, although time has blotted out the recollection of his diplomatic achievements or relegated them to obscure chronicles and manuscripts that are seldom disturbed save by scholars. To nine out of ten he is known only as a painter, and his fame rests upon the work that chances to have given his critics their first view and most lasting impression of his varied achievements. It may be said that among those who care least for Rubens, and are quite satisfied to condemn him for the coarseness with which he treated certain subjects, there are many who are prompt to declare that in matters of art the treatment is of the first importance and the subject is but secondary. However, Rubens is hardly in need of an apologist. His best work makes him famous in any company, and there is so much of it that the rest may be disregarded. Moreover, we must not forget that the types he portrayed from time to time with such amazing frankness really existed all round him. He took them as he found them, just as the earlier painters of the Renaissance took their Madonnas from the peasant girls they found working in the fields, or travelling to the cities on saint days and at times of high festival. Many a Renaissance Madonna enshrined on canvas for the adoration of the devout could remove the least suspicion of sanctity from herself, if she did but raise her downcast eyes or smile, as doubtless she smiled in the studio wherein she was immortalised. For the artist sees a vision beyond the sitter, and under his brush the sanctification or profanation of a type are matters of simple and rapid accomplishment. If another Rubens were to arise to-day, he could find sitters in plenty who would respond to the treatment that his prototype has made familiar. Perhaps to the men and women with whom he was thrown in contact, these creations were interesting inasmuch as they afforded a glimpse into an under-world of which they knew little or nothing. The offence of certain pictures is increased by the fact that, when Rubens painted them, he had not attained to the supreme mastership over colour, and inspiration of composition, that came to him in later life. But in a

brief review of the artist's life and work enough has been told of the aspects upon which his detractors love to dilate. It is time to turn to his brilliant and varied career, and note the incidents that have the greatest interest or the deepest influence upon his art work.

II

THE PAINTER'S LIFE

Peter Paul Rubens was born in A.D. 1577, at Siegen in Germany, where his father, Dr. John Rubens, a man of great attainments, was living in disgrace arising out of an old intrigue with the dissolute wife of William the Silent. But for the necessity of shielding the reputation of the House of Orange, there seems no doubt that John Rubens would have paid the death penalty for his offence. It is curious to reflect that, had he done so, Peter Paul would have been lost to the world, for the intrigue would seem to have occurred in the neighbourhood of the year 1570, while Peter Paul was not born until seven years later. When the child was one year old the Rubens family was allowed to return to Cologne, where John Rubens had gone on leaving Antwerp in 1568. Here Peter Paul and his elder brother, Philip, were brought up, in utter ignorance of the misfortunes that had befallen their father, whose death was recorded when his famous son was nine or ten years old. After his decease the boys' mother decided to return to Antwerp, where her husband in his early days had enjoyed a considerable reputation as a lawyer, and held civic appointments. Although much of the family money must have been lost, perhaps on account of the fall in values resulting from the terrible war with Spain, there would seem to have been enough to enable the widow and her two sons to live in comfort, if not in luxury. Peter Paul was sent to a good school, where he made progress and became very popular, probably because he was strikingly handsome, considerably gifted, and very quick to learn.

PLATE III.—THE FOUR PHILOSOPHERS (In the Pitti Palace, Florence)

This picture was probably painted in Italy. The man sitting behind the table with an open book before him is Justus Lipsius the philosopher. To his left is one of his pupils, and on the right we see Philip Rubens, pen in hand, and Peter Paul himself standing up against a red curtain.



At the age of thirteen school-days came to an end, and the boy became a page in the service of the widowed Countess of Lalaing, whose husband had been one of the governors of Antwerp. Here, at a very impressionable age, Rubens obtained first his acquaintance with and finally his mastery over all the intricacies of courtly etiquette. In quite a short time he became a polished gentleman, in the sixteenth-century acceptation of that term. But the instinct to study art already developed made the duties of a page seem tiresome and unattractive, and we learn that the boy importuned his mother to be allowed to study painting. Apparently he had shown sufficient promise to justify the request, and he was placed, first under an unknown painter named Verhaecht and then under Adam van Noort, with whom he remained four years before passing to the studio of Otto van Veen, a scholar, a gentleman, and a painter of quality. The life here would seem to have developed in Rubens many of the qualities that were destined to bring him fame and great rewards. By the time he was twenty, the Guild of St. Luke in Antwerp received him as a member, and a year later he received an appointment from the city to assist his master in some civic decorations. So the glittering years of his first youth passed, happily, prosperously, and uneventfully, and when he was no more than twenty-three

Peter Paul Rubens turned his steps towards Italy, then, as Paris is now, the Mecca of the pilgrim of the Arts.

If we wish to find some explanation for the splendid colouring that makes the masterpieces of Rubens the delight of every unprejudiced eye, we may surely be content to remember that he saw Venice with the enthusiastic eye of twenty-three in the year 1600. Even to-day when Venice, vulgarised to the fullest extent that modern ingenuity can accomplish, has become no more than a remnant most forlorn of what it was, it is one of the world's wonder cities. When the seventeenth century was opening its eventful pages, the memory of wonderful achievements was upon the great city of the Adriatic, it was still a power to be reckoned with. The season of pageants had not passed, and the luck that seemed destined to accompany Rubens throughout his career was in close attendance upon him here. The Duke of Mantua, Vincenzo Gonzaga, saw some of his work, and was so struck by its quality that he sent for the young painter. The man seemed worthy of his creations, and the Duke promptly offered him a position in his suite, an offer too good to be declined. Thereafter the sojourn in Venice was a short one. Mantua, Florence, and Genoa were visited in turn, and in Mantua, after some months travelling to and fro, the Court settled down, and Rubens was enabled to study the splendid collection of works that the city's rulers had collected. In the late summer of the following year Rubens would seem to have visited Rome, where he faced the terrible heat without any ill effect and devoted himself with untiring energy to a study of the work that is to be seen there and nowhere else. It would appear that he was well received by the leading artists of the day, that he made a friend of Caravaggio, and he was soon commissioned to paint an altar-piece for the Church of the Holy Cross of Jerusalem. The work, done in three parts, is now we believe in the possession of the French Government, and is to be seen in Grasse or one of the neighbouring towns of the Mediterranean littoral. When Rubens' leave of absence expired—it must not be forgotten that he was in the service of Mantua's ruler, and was not his own master—he returned to the north, where the Duke would seem to have employed him for a time as an art expert. We may imagine that politics and art were closely connected, and that Rubens soon knew responsibility in connection with both. The work must have been very well done in each case, for rather more than a year later, when it became necessary in the interests of Mantua's political position to send a message to the King of Spain, Rubens was the chosen envoy.

Nowadays the journey from Mantua to Madrid may be accomplished without extraordinary exertion in forty-eight hours, but three hundred years ago such a journey must have savoured of adventure, more particularly as the painter-

diplomat was in charge of the splendid presents sent to Philip by the Duke. Nearly a year passed before Rubens returned to Mantua. His mission executed, he was rewarded with the grant of a regular income, and after executing some more work at home to the complete satisfaction of his patron, he returned to Rome, this time in the company of his brother.

They lived near the Piazza di Spagna, where the Roman models and flower-sellers congregate to this day, and tourists are as the sand upon the sea-shore for multitude. Philip Rubens, smitten by the weakness to which so many men have succumbed before and since, celebrated his journey by writing a book. It was printed by the famous Plantin Press, with one of whose directors Peter Paul had been at school, and was illustrated by the artist. We may suppose that the work Rubens had done in Rome on the occasion of his earlier visit had satisfied its purchasers, for he received another commission for the Chiesa Nuova, but was recalled before it was completed, and taken to Genoa by the Duke of Mantua. However, he soon returned to Rome, where he remained until the close of 1608 and then left for Antwerp, where his mother, who had been living in that city for some years, was dangerously ill. Rubens does not seem to have known how ill she was, for he arrived in Antwerp too late to see her. She was a woman cast in heroic mould, most generous of wives, most devoted of mothers.

PLATE IV.—ISABELLA BRANDT
(In the Wallace Collection)

Naturally enough Rubens painted many portraits of his first wife. There is the delightful work in the Pinacotek at Munich where the painter sits by her side, there are others in the Uffizi at Florence, and the great Hermitage Gallery at St. Petersburg.



Perhaps the shock of her death awoke Rubens to the disadvantages attaching to the paid service of any man, perhaps he was beginning to realise his own quality and to know that he could stand alone. Perhaps he saw, too, that Italy had taught him as much as his years would allow him to assimilate, enough to make a man of mark in Antwerp. We have no certain information on these points, we can do no more than make surmises, but we do know that Rubens wrote to the Duke of Mantua, thanking him for all the favours and marks of confidence that he had received, and acquainting him with his decision to resign from his service. With the return to Antwerp the era that opened with the visit to Venice eight years before comes to a close, and we enter upon the most strenuous period of the artist's life.

III

SECOND PERIOD

Rubens carried an assured reputation with him to Antwerp. The story of his success had doubtless been spread through the town by people who were in touch with the Italian courts, and it is hardly likely that his elder brother Philip, now secretary to the Antwerp Town Council, and a man wielding considerable influence, had forgotten to tell the story of his brother's progress. Antwerp was in the early enjoyment of a period of peace following disastrous war, and it was quite in keeping with the spirit of the times that the leading citizens, who had taken a prominent part in the world of strife, should now turn their thoughts to the world of art and should endeavour to take their part in the friendly competition that all prosperous cities waged against one another in their pursuit of beauty; and this competition led to the enriching of churches and council-chambers with the finest ripe fruits of contemporary art. Antwerp had established a circle for the exclusive benefit of those who had travelled in Italy, because it was recognised on all sides that the best mental and artistic development was associated with Italian travel. Rubens was admitted at once to the charmed circle on the initiative of his friend Jean Breughel, the animal painter, with whom Rubens collaborated in a picture that may be seen to-day at the Hague, and is called "The Earthly Paradise," a quaint medley of two styles that cannot be persuaded to harmonise.

Peter Paul lived with his beloved brother Philip, to whose influence we are probably justified in tracing the first two commissions that were given to the young painter. One was to take part in the work of re-decorating the Town Hall, the other was to prepare an altar-piece for the Church of St. Walpurga. For the Town Hall Rubens painted the first of his long series of "Adorations," and though it is emphatically one of the works of his first period, and is far from expressing the varied qualities that have given him enduring fame, it created sufficient sensation in Antwerp to bring him the position of Court painter, with a definite salary and a special permission to remain in the city of his choice. Had he been a lesser man he would have been called away to attend the Court in Brussels.

PLATE V.—LE CHAPEAU DE PAILLE (In the National Gallery)

This is a portrait of Suzanne Fourment, a sister of the painter's second wife, painted when the sitter was about twenty-one years old. The serenity of the girl's mind is admirably expressed in this sparkling work, and is one of Rubens' successful essays in portraiture. Another study of Suzanne Fourment may be seen in Vienna.



Undoubtedly Rubens was a patriot, a man to whom the fallen fortunes of his city appealed very strongly. We must never forget that the endless wars stirred up by Spanish ambition had roused the best instincts of patriotism the world over, and though Rubens was not a warrior, he was a statesman and a patriot, who

knew that his hands and brain could serve his city in their own effective fashion, one in no way inferior in its results to that of the fighting men. Perhaps we may trace to all the mental disturbance of this era the artist's first great transition, for the Rubens who painted in Antwerp after his return from Italy and gave the "Descent from the Cross" to his city, is quite a different man from the one who painted the earlier pictures. He has matured and developed, has completed the period of assimilation through which all creative artists must pass, has gathered from the talents, from the genius of the men he has studied, the material for founding a style of his own. He begins to speak with his own voice.

It is well that Rubens' industry was on a par with his talents, for commissions poured in upon him in the first years of his return from Italy. They came not singly but in battalions, and very soon we find Peter Paul Rubens following the fashion of his time and establishing a studio school. Naturally enough there were plenty of young men who wished to become his pupils, and plenty of old ones who had just missed distinction and were anxious for any work that was remunerative. Rubens realised that if he could but turn their gifts to the best advantage they would at least be as valuable to him as he could be to them. Consequently he responded to the suggestions that were made to him on every side, and gathered the cleverest unattached men of his city to the studio, giving each one his work to do. Let us place to his credit the fact that there was no disguise about this procedure, it was open and unabashed. Rubens would even send pupils to start a work that had been commissioned, and would not appear on the scene until the first outline of the picture was on the canvas. Then he would come along and with a few unerring strokes correct or supplement the composition, to which his pupils could pay their further attentions. Rubens received high prices for his work, but would give his name to a picture in return for a comparatively low fee, if the purchaser would but be content to have his design and leave the painting to pupils. It may be said that Rubens was always fortunate in his selection of assistants, just as he was fortunate in other affairs of life. The great Vandyck was among those who worked in his studio, Snyders the celebrated animal painter was another; it is said that Rubens never touched his work.

Like the Florentine painters of the Renaissance, Rubens was by no means satisfied to devote himself entirely to paint. He had been greatly impressed during his sojourn in Italy by the extraordinary beauty of the palaces of Genoa—a beauty, be it added, that charms us no less to-day when time has added its priceless gifts to the architects' design. Rubens published a book on the Genoese palaces, with something between fifty and one hundred drawings of his own,

most carefully made. He found time to make illustrations for the famous Plantin Press, to which we have referred already. He superintended the work of engraving his own pictures, and in short showed himself a man competent to grasp more than the common burden of interests, and to deal with them all with a rare intelligence coupled with sound business instinct. Although the painter's education had not been great, he had acquired scholarship at a time when classical education was considered of the very highest value, and no man who lacked it could claim to be regarded as a gentleman. He maintained correspondence with friends in the great cities of Europe, and as he had great personal attractions and a perfect charm of manner with which to support his industry and achievements, there is small need to wonder at his progress. Success would indeed have been a fickle jade had she refused to surrender to such wooing.

IV

THE LATER YEARS

When the painter had passed his fortieth year he received a commission from the Dowager Queen Maria de Medici to paint certain panels for her palace in Paris, and in order to see them properly placed and to get a comprehensive idea of the scheme of decoration, he betook himself with the first part of his finished work to the French capital. There is no doubt that Rubens was already regarded in the governing circles of Antwerp as something more than a painter. His relations with the ruling house had brought him into touch with diplomatic developments—he had handled one or two with extreme tact, delicacy, and success. The Infanta Isabel relied upon him in seasons of emergency, and although the political value of his first visit to Paris in 1623 cannot be gauged, it is fairly safe to assume that his second visit to the capital two years later was far more concerned with politics than paint. To put before the reader a brief story of the complications of the political situation between France, Spain, and the Low Countries would make impossible demands upon strictly limited space, but those who wish to understand something of the politics of his time may be referred to the works of Emile Michel and Max Rooses on Peter Paul Rubens and his time. They will find there far more historical and biographical matter than can be referred to in this place. Suffice it to say that from 1625 Rubens must be regarded as a diplomatist quite as much as a painter, but curiously enough the development of the political side of his life did nothing to destroy the quality of his painting. In fact he seems to have travelled along the road of diplomacy to his best and latest manner, to have seen life more clearly, and the problems of his art more intelligently than before, to have brought to his work something of the quality that we call genius. The one gift that the gods denied him was poetic fancy, a quality that would have kept him from the portrayal of types and incidents that we are apt to regard, with or without justification, as ugly, that would have made his classicism pleasing to eyes that read it at its true value. But Rubens was one of the men who have to fight, not against failure but against success; and the shrewd practical nature that made him what he was served as an effective barrier against acquisition of the qualities that would have lifted him to the region that always remained just beyond his reach.

**PLATE VI.—THE DESCENT FROM THE
CROSS
(In the Cathedral, Antwerp)**

Here we have Rubens in his most realistic mood and in all his strength. Not only is the composition of a very complicated picture quite masterly and the colour scheme most happily distributed, but the contrast in the expression on the faces round the dead Christ is expressed in most dramatic fashion. The eye and the mind see the tragic drama at the same moment; although the subject had been treated hundreds of times already, the painter found it possible to give the theme a fresh and enduring expression.



1628 was a very interesting year in the painter's life, for he was sent on a mission to the Court of Spain, where he met Velazquez, who was instructed to show him all the art treasures of the capital. What would we not give to-day for an authentic account of the conversations that these men must have held together? Rubens was at the zenith of his fame, if not of his achievement, Velazquez was unknown save in Seville and Madrid, and was fighting against every class of disadvantage on the road to belated recognition. Let those who sneer at Rubens and can find no good about him, remember that he it was who turned Velazquez' attention to Italy. Rubens found time to paint portraits of several members of the royal family, and these works are fine likenesses enough, though they do not pretend to rival Velazquez' achievements in the same field. The diplomatic business was conducted with so much skill that Philip entrusted his visitor with a mission to Paris and London. In the last-named city Rubens was received by Charles I., who conferred a knighthood upon him, and approved of his commission to decorate the banqueting-chamber at Whitehall.

Back again in Antwerp, Rubens found his talents sorely tried by the diplomatic developments in which the restless ambition of Maria de Medici involved all the countries subject directly or indirectly to her influence. He found himself compelled to go twice to Holland in the early thirties, but the death of the Infanta Isabel in 1633 removed him awhile from the heated arena of politics. Rubens prepared Antwerp for the visit of the Archduke Ferdinand, the Spanish governor, the city being decorated for this occasion at a cost of 80,000 florins. The work was so successful that the Archduke paid a special visit of congratulation to the artist, who was laid up in his room by an attack of gout. Two or three years later, some warnings that his strength would not hold out much longer availed to turn Rubens from the life of Courts and capitals, and he purchased for himself the Château de Stein, a very beautiful estate that is preserved for us by the delightful picture in the National Gallery. There he settled down for awhile to fulfil certain commissions for the King of Spain, and doubtless had he been permitted to remain in retirement his health would have been the better and his life the longer. But Antwerp could not dispense with the services of her painter-diplomat, and many a time when he would have been in his studio working at his ease, some urgent message from the city would drag him away. In the winter of 1639 he passed some months in Antwerp, working as best he could in the intervals of severe attacks of gout. The King of Spain's commission was still unfinished, and some feeling that he himself would never be able to complete it led Rubens to engage a larger number of assistants than usual, and to content himself with directing their efforts and supplementing them

as occasion arose. He seems to have known that death was near, for he made his will and prepared to meet the end. It came with May in 1640, when the painter was in the sixty-fourth year of a brilliant and useful life.

Rubens was twice married, first to Isabel Brandt, who became his wife when she was eighteen and he was thirty-two, shortly after his return to Antwerp from the service of the Duke of Mantua. A portrait of the two sons this wife bore him may be seen in Vienna. Isabel Brandt did not live to see her boys, Albert and Nicholas, grow to manhood. She died in 1626, some say from the plague that swept Antwerp in that year. Four years later the painter married the beautiful Helena Fourment, when he was fifty-four and she was sixteen, and she survived him. He seems to have been a good and affectionate husband and father. In fact, it is hard to find among the biographers of Rubens anybody who speaks ill of the artist as a man.

V

THE PAINTER'S ART

Turning from a survey of Rubens' life to a consideration of his art, the three divisions to which his work groups itself naturally, are very clearly seen. Up to the time of his marriage with Isabel Brandt his work may be referred to the first division, and in art it may be said that no man's earliest pictures are of much consequence save for their promise of higher things. They do little more than mark his progress, record impressions he has received from strong personalities, and mark his own path through the influences of different schools and varied appeals, to the complete expression of himself. Rubens was never a slavish imitator, he never assumed the mantles of the men he admired, as so many great painters have done. Goya, for example, was a man whose range of thought and capacity for receiving impressions were so great that he has painted after the manner of half-a-dozen masters, and there are pictures to be seen in Madrid to-day that are painted with Goya's brush and recall Fragonard. Such instances may be multiplied, and Rubens is to be admired for the restraint that marked this side of his early work.

From the time of his marriage down to the season when he became recognised on all sides as a diplomatist, let us say roughly from 1610 to 1626, we get the second period, and to this may be referred the greater part of the work that has given offence—the presentation of the coarsest types of men and women in a state of nature—the treatment of some of the grossest incidents in mythological stories in fashion that leaves nothing to the imagination.

We are justified in asking ourselves whether the extraordinary development of the painter's social and political life did not avail to arrest in late middle age any tendencies he might otherwise have had to express still further the coarser side of classical subjects. By the time he reached the forties, Rubens was the companion and even the trusted counsellor of princes and rulers. Such refinement as Western Europe boasted was to be met in the circles he frequented. The greatest work of the greatest masters was within his reach, and he had travelled to the point at which a man is able to select as well as to admire, at which he can distinguish clearly between the points that make for a picture's

strength and those that detract from it.

PLATE VII.—HENRY IV. LEAVING FOR A CAMPAIGN (In the Louvre)

Here the painter, leaving mythology and allegory for a time, is seen in one of his most effective historical pictures. Henry IV., who is leaving for the war in Germany, is seen conferring upon his Queen the charge of the kingdom.



Rubens on arriving in Italy in the days when he had first taken service under the Duke of Mantua, was doubtless unduly impressed by Michel Angelo and Raphael. On no other grounds can we account for the delight that his earliest pictures manifest in the portrayal of massive and even ugly limbs. Doubtless he was influenced too by Titian, though we cannot agree that it was his admiration

for the master that made him copy the King's Titians in the Prado, for it is more probable that on this occasion he simply obeyed instructions. Moreover, Rome appealed to him more than Venice did. The wistful purity of a Bellini Madonna, the exquisite loveliness of a Bellini child or cherub, left him unmoved, but a Titian or a Tintoretto at its biggest, if not at its best, pleased him, and when he came in Rome to the works of Raphael and Michel Angelo he would seem to have looked no further for inspiration. Doubtless he heard many interesting theories of art in Rome, where, as we have said, Caravaggio, who wielded considerable influence in the art world, was among his friends. But Rubens thought out things for himself, and learned to quell his own instincts and to subdue his own faults as they were revealed to him.

Violence is perhaps the characteristic of Rubens' early work. He has the grand manner without the grand method, his contrasts of light and shade and even of colour amuse where they do not offend, and his drawing is by no means remarkable or inspired. At best it is correct. We feel that we cannot see the wood because of the trees, that the blending has not been sufficiently skilful to bring about proportion and harmony, and that the expression of a giant form with prize-fighter's muscles in the foreground of a canvas is sufficient to fill the painter with a delight that enables him happily to ignore the rest. It is the enthusiasm of clever youth, the youth of a man in whose veins there is enough and to spare of very healthy blood, in whose mental equipment refinement has been overlooked.

The death of his mother, the distressful plight of his favourite city, the responsibility of his commissions, his marriage and the fruits of his Italian travel brought about the second period, and started the traditions that give Antwerp a school and a name in the history of European art. The violence passes slowly from the canvases, the straining after effect that is so obvious and often so unpleasing in the earlier pictures goes with it. The chiaroscuro is more subdued and consequently more pleasing, only in the handling of colour the painter is still clumsy and heavy. Rubens, the great colourist, seems to have been born when the artist was more than forty years old.

Some of the best work of the second period is in Antwerp and Brussels, but it is to be found scattered all over Europe, and there are examples in private collections in this country. Perhaps the dominant impression that these works leave is one of certain difficulties created to be overcome. Just as the painter in his first manner revelled in his strength, so in his second period he rejoices in his skill. It was left to the later years to weld strength and skill into the service, on

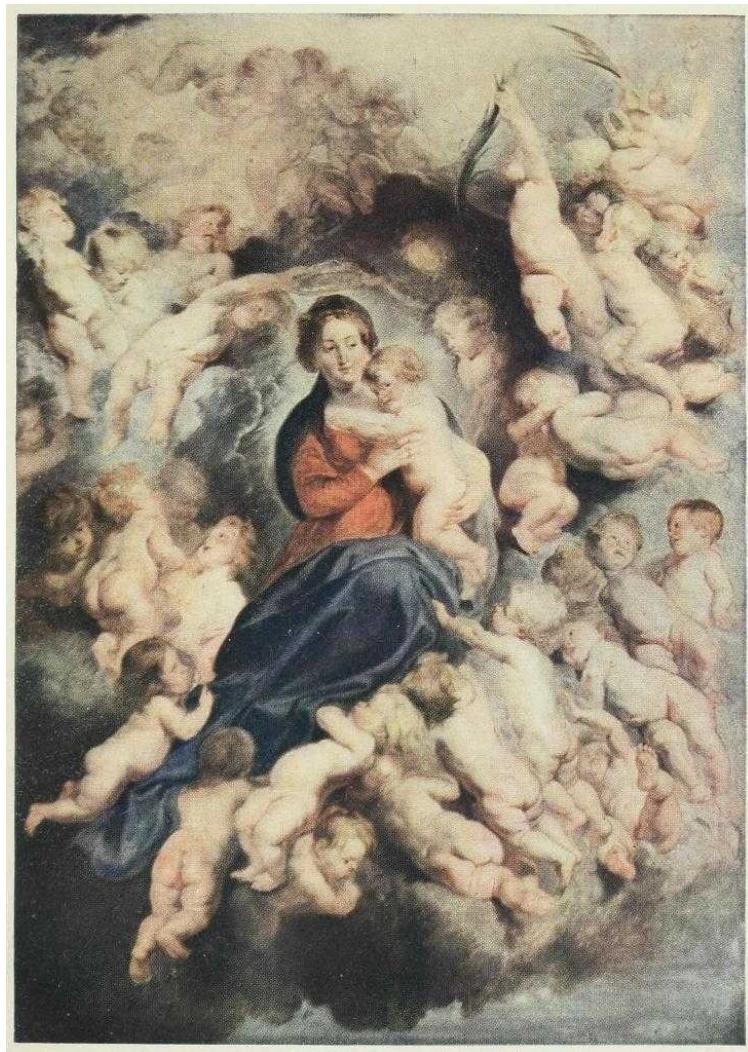
pictures that could stand for both and emphasise neither. Mythology continued to hold him, indeed we must never forget that Rubens lived in the age of pseudo-classicism, and is to be counted among its victims. To his second period belongs such work as the disgusting "Procession of Silenus" now in Munich, a picture in which the grossness of the theme is only rivalled by the vulgarity of the treatment. Some of Rubens' apologists have held that this class of work was painted as a protest against vice, but such apologies are far-fetched. Rubens needs no apologist. Consider his work as a whole, and what is good dwarfs what is bad. Doubtless, had he been able in the later days to re-possess and destroy some of his more tainted pictures, he would have done so. It will be remarked by all who know Rubens' work intimately, that throughout his life he was happier with a Venus than a Madonna, more at home with some great classical figure, than with the picture of Christ. He did not respond to Christianity in the sense that the Venetians responded to it, he could not for all his reputation have painted a Madonna as Bellini did, and there is no reason to believe that he would have cared to do so. Then again we may not forget that Rubens the artist, and Rubens the courtier, and Rubens the special envoy, were closely associated with Rubens the man of business, who would always have painted for choice the work likely to find immediate acceptance. There were times when some legend of Saint or Martyr moved him strangely, and he turned to it with a measure of inspiration not often excelled by the greatest of the Renaissance artists; but these occasions were rare, although Antwerp preserves one of the most effective results of such inspiration in the "Last Communion of St. Francis." It may be remarked in this place that to see Rubens at his best, one must not go to the National Gallery or to the Louvre or to the Prado—Antwerp and Vienna hold some of the finest examples of his second and third manner. And we must never forget that Art is concerned with treatment, and that subject is of secondary interest to artists.

When he became recognised as a diplomatist whose services were required by Europe's greatest potentates, Rubens had passed the meridian of life. He had known prosperity from the very earliest days, he had no occasion to paint pictures of the sort so admirably summed up by the offensive word "pot-boiler." Kings and Queens and Emperors were offering him commissions, he was, if we may say so, on his best behaviour. He rose to the height of every great occasion. The commission that Maria de Medici gave him for her palace seems to have brought him to his third and latest manner, and from that year until death overtook him Rubens was one of the great masters of European art. If we could eliminate all the pictures of his first manner and a considerable portion of those belonging to his middle period, his claims would hardly be denied by the

representatives and supporters of any school. He seems to have received added inspiration from his child wife, and there are few more delightful pictures than one to be seen in Munich in which Rubens and Helena Fourment are walking from their garden to their château. Perhaps even in the later days woman was nothing more than a thing of beauty for a man's delight, and man was no more than a godlike animal, but a well-defined measure of refinement was always beyond their painter's mental or artistic conceptions. It is sufficient for us that the appeal of nature came to him with great strength. The Château of Stein in our National Gallery and the Rainbow Landscape in the Wallace Collection gives sufficient evidence of this, while such a work as the Garden of Venus in the Prado suggests the limitations that were with him throughout his life. It is fair to say that in the later years they were not expressed so prominently in his work.

**PLATE VIII.—THE VIRGIN AND THE
HOLY INNOCENTS
(In the Louvre)**

In this picture Rubens allows his brush to run away with him as though for sheer joy in its capacity. Perhaps his study of the Virgin is a little commonplace, a little too suggestive of the exuberance of Flanders rather than the refinement and spirituality of Nazareth. But the studies of the Holy Innocents are a delight, and make the canvas supremely attractive. It will be seen that the grouping of the children results in every possible difficulty that an artist may have to face, but that Rubens has encountered them all with sure, hard, and steady eye, in fashion worthy of Tintoretto himself.



Finally we have to consider and acknowledge his triumphs as a colourist. It may be said that Rubens, for all his gifts, required more than twenty years of unremitting labour to obtain his mastery over colour, but when once it was his he retained the gift to the last hour. In the early days Rubens as a colourist was a person of no importance, the grossness of his composition and the tameness of his drawing were not redeemed by the handling of pigment. In the second period the use of paint is far more skilled, but it does not blend, neither does it glow. In the later years it acquires both gifts, and the exquisitely luminous quality of some of his pictures, the marvellous delicacy of flesh tint, that must have astonished and delighted his patrons, is preserved to us to-day. In fact it may be said that Rubens has preserved his colour to a larger extent than many great painters who came after him. He is far more reliable in this aspect of his art than is our own Sir Joshua, whose portraits have long ceased to tell the story they must have told to delighted and flattered sitters. It was no effort of genius that

made Rubens a supreme colourist in the later years. He came to his kingdom by dint of sheer hard work, but for his painstaking devotion to labours such results could not have been achieved.

The spirit of the Renaissance travelled very slowly from Italy to the Netherlands, and that its influence was felt in the sixteenth century did not lead to any very marked divergence from the traditions that the art of the Netherlands was following. Italian form and Italian sentiment met with little response there, and there is no doubt that the eighty years of conflict with Spain which led to the recognition of the Republic, turned men's thoughts away from art. By the time it was possible to revive a school, the Netherlands were looking to life rather than to faith, and even the classicism of the period that turned Rubens towards pictures illustrating mythological incidents could not help him to create imaginary figures. This is as it should have been, for it made eighteenth-century art what it was through the influence of Rubens and Vandyck. He filled his canvas with the types he saw around him, and while nobody will dispute the virtue of the Netherlands, there will be few found to assert that it produced the Latin type of womanhood. The people of the Netherlands do not belong to the Latin races; that is why they did not respond earlier to the Renaissance, that is why they look at what seems to be their worst rather than their best in some of Rubens' most ambitious works. Yet by reason of his long sojourn and hard study in Italy, Rubens did do something considerable to bring Italian art and tradition into the Netherlands, and if he could not establish it there, the cause of failure was that the genius of the country was opposed to it. Among the painters who worked for Rubens or were greatly influenced by him the best known are Anthony Vandyck, Frans Snyders, Abraham Janssens, Jacob Jordaens, and Jan Van Den Hoecke. Then again, of course, it must not be forgotten that he exercised a very great influence upon David Teniers, and that he served the interests of art development far more than he could have done by giving fresh life to an art form that had served its time and purpose.

Rubens the landscape painter, the painter of religious and mythological subjects, has rather obscured Rubens the portrait painter, and this is not as it should be, for many will be inclined to agree that it is as a portrait painter that Rubens was often at his best. Visitors to Florence will not forget the portrait group entitled "The Philosophers," that may be seen in the Pitti Palace. Our Wallace Collection has a delightful portrait of Isabel Brandt, and the National Gallery holds the portrait of Suzanne Fourment, "Le Chapeau de Paille," while Amsterdam and other cities hold portraits of his second wife, the famous portrait of Gervatius is to be seen in Antwerp, and there are several delightful examples

of his portraiture in Brussels. It was in these schools of art that Rubens has succeeded in pleasing many who turn with feelings not far removed from disgust from his unshrinking studies of the coarse overblown or overgrown womanhood. He contrived either to confer a measure of dignity upon his sitters or to conserve one. His portraits of his two wives, and the portrait group in the Pitti Palace that introduces his brother, are full of a deep feeling for which we may look in vain to many of his larger canvases. Just as the pianist or violinist will turn from playing some wonderful concerto bristling with difficulties for the soloist and calculated to delight the ears of the groundlings, and then taking up some simple piece by a great master will infuse into it all the qualities that the showy concerto hid, so Rubens turned from the wars and loves of gods and goddesses, from Bacchic carnivals and groups in which nudity is insisted upon sometimes at the expense of relevance, and would paint portraits that will be a delight as long as they remain with us. Rubens painting the portrait of wife or brother or friend, and Rubens covering vast canvases with glittering and sometimes meretricious work are two different men. We may admire the latter, but we come near to intimate appreciation of the former. In the portraits the man is revealed, in the big pictures we see no more than artist, and some of us fail to realise how clever he is, how many problems of composition and tone and light and shade he has grappled with and overcome in manner well-nigh heroic.

The secret of his changing moods is of course beyond us, but perhaps one may hazard an explanation for the difference in the quality of the work done. As far as we can see from a study of the painter's work and life, he approached mythology and Christianity from a purely pictorial standpoint, and did not believe in one or the other. "The Procession to Calvary," "The Crucifixion," "The Descent from the Cross," "The Flight into Egypt," "The Adoration of the Magi," "The Draught of Fishes," "The Raising of the Cross," "The Assumption of the Virgin," "The Last Supper," "The Circumcision," "The Flagellation," and the rest, were no more and no less to him as subjects than "The Drunken Hercules" or "The Battle of the Amazons," "The Garden of Venus" or "The Judgment of Paris." They were popular subjects for effective treatment, pictures that would make a sure appeal to those who loved either the sacred or the profane in art, pictures to be executed with all possible skill at the greatest possible speed, and with a measure of assistance regulated by the price that was to be paid for them. But the portraits of his friends, of the brother he loved, and of the wives to whom he was a devoted husband, stood on quite a different plane. He felt the human interest attaching to them, and this human interest brought to his canvas certain qualities that belong to the heart rather than the

head, and have given them a claim that is not disputed even by the painter's most severe critics.

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